



Mauritius

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

Tensions between the Hindu majority and Christian and Muslim minorities persist; however, members of each group worshipped without hindrance.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 718 square miles, and its population is approximately 1.2 million. In the 2000 census, an estimated 50 percent of the population claimed to be Hindu, 32 percent Christian, and 16 percent Muslim. Less than 1 percent claimed to be, atheist, agnostic, or of another faith. There are no official figures for those who actively practice their faith, but there are estimates that the figure is approximately 60 percent for all religious groups.

Approximately 85 percent of Christians are Roman Catholic. The remaining 15 percent are members of the following churches: Adventist, Assembly of God, Christian Tamil, Church of England, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Evangelical, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Sunnis account for more than 90 percent of Muslims; there are some Shi'a Muslims. Many Buddhists are also practicing Catholics and many citizens of Chinese ancestry send their children to the Loreto Convent primary schools in the major towns, which are managed by the Catholic diocese.

The north is more Hindu and the south is more Catholic. There also are large populations of Hindus and Catholics in the main cities from the capital of Port Louis to the central cities of Quatre Bornes and Curepipe, and most Muslims and Christian churches are concentrated in these areas. The offshore island of Rodrigues, with a population of approximately 36,000, is predominantly Catholic.

The country is a small island nation, and its ethnic groups, known as "communal groups," are tightly knit. Inter marriage is relatively rare, although the most recent census indicates that it is increasing. An individual's name usually identifies his or her ethnic and religious background. There is a strong correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity. Citizens of Indian ethnicity usually are Hindus or Muslims. Those of Chinese ancestry generally practice both Buddhism and Catholicism. Creoles and citizens of European descent usually are Catholic.

Foreign missionary groups operate, including the Baptist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion.

Religious organizations that were present prior to independence, such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England,

the Presbyterian Church, the Seventh-day Adventists, Hindus, and Muslims, are recognized in a parliamentary decree. These groups also receive an annual lump-sum payment from the Ministry of Finance based upon the number of adherents as determined by the census. Newer religious organizations (which must have a minimum of seven members) are registered by the Registrar of Associations and are recognized as legal entities with tax-exempt privileges. The Government is not known to have refused registration to any group.

Foreign missionary groups are allowed to operate on a case-by-case basis. Although there are no government regulations restricting their presence or limiting their proselytizing activities, groups must obtain both a visa and a work permit for each missionary. The Prime Minister's office is the final authority on issuance of these required documents to missionaries. While there are no limits on the ability of missionaries to operate in the country, there are limits on the number of missionaries permitted to obtain the requisite visas and work permits.

National holidays are representative of the country's multi-religious, multiethnic population. Hindu (Maha Shivratri, Ganesh Chaturthi, and Divali), Tamil (Thaipusam Cavadee, and Ougadi), Christian (Christmas and All Saints' Day), and Muslim (Eid al-Fitr) holy days are national holidays.

The Ministry of Arts and Culture is responsible for promoting cultural interaction among different cultural components within the country, and in 2004 and 2005 ran daylong events aimed at fostering cultural (and therefore religious) understanding. For the second consecutive year, the Ministry held daylong activities for Divali and Eid al-Fitr. The Ministry also held a daylong celebration of Christmas.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. While for political reasons in the past the Government has favored the population's Hindu majority with greater access to government patronage, there were no reports that this continued during the period covered by this report.

Due to the predominance of Hindu citizens in the upper echelons of the civil service, some minorities, usually Creoles and Muslims, allege that they are prevented from reaching the highest levels of government. Despite this sentiment, a member of the Franco-Mauritian minority, Paul Raymond Berenger, became Prime Minister through a prearranged agreement between the parties of the governing coalition in 2003, making him the first Christian Prime Minister of the country. Elections were scheduled for July 3, 2005.

While some Creole political groups allege that Christian Creoles receive unjust treatment from the police, there was no evidence that this was based on religious differences. Observers believe that such incidents likely are a result largely of ethnic differences, since the police force predominantly is Indo-Mauritian and the fact that Creoles tend to live in poorer areas where crime is more prevalent. Tensions between Creoles and police were ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.

Foreign missionaries sometimes are prohibited from residing in the country beyond five years (which would permit them to seek citizenship). Religious organizations are permitted to send new missionaries to replace them; however, groups sometimes encounter bureaucratic obstacles in obtaining work permits and residence visas for replacements. This occasionally prevents such organizations from replacing departing missionaries in a timely fashion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

A committee consisting of religious leaders from each of the major religions met several times during the period covered by this report to discuss interreligious harmony. The committee set as its goal the development of a greater understanding between religious groups. In January 2005, the committee held a conference that focused both on mutual understanding and demonstrating the necessity for collaboration in promoting social harmony. The committee addressed several questions including the proper role of religion in society.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Tensions between the Hindu majority and Christian and Muslim minorities persist; however, no violent confrontations occurred

during the period covered by this report.

There are 12 Catholic secondary schools, called Catholic Colleges, which are administered by the Catholic diocese and receive grants from the Government. The Private Secondary School Authority, which is a government body under the Ministry of Education, oversees the schools. In 2004, 50 percent of the available seats in these schools were allocated to pupils according to the certificate of primary education results, and, therefore, were based on merit. The remaining 50 percent were allocated by the Catholic Church and were given to Catholic students. The President of the Hindu Teacher's Union, Suttihudeo Tengur, challenged the constitutionality of this agreement between the Government and Catholic Church. Although the Government denied knowledge of a preference for Catholic students under its seat allocation policy, in April 2004 the Supreme Court decided in favor of Tengur's claims that religious beliefs should not be taken into account when pupils are admitted to these Catholic Schools.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In September 2004, the Embassy hosted a digital video conference on the topic of Muslim life in America; the event was attended by several local Muslim leaders.

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